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PROVIDENTIAL DESIGN OF THE SLAVERY AGITATION.

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED TO THE

Congregational Church of Gloversville

ON THE

National Fast Day, January 4th, 1861.

By the Rev. Homer N. Dunning.

"Is not this the Fast that I have chosen ! to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke."—Isaiah lviii : 6.

GLOVERSVILLE:

A. PIERSON, BOOK & JOB PRINTER.

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DISCOURSE.

Joshua xxiii, 13. "Know for a certainty that the Lord your God will no more drive out any of these nations from before you ; but they shall be snares and traps unto you, and scourges in your sides, and thorns in your eyes."

Soon after the family of Noah left the ark, an event occurred in their experience, which to a large part of the human race, had almost the character and effect of a second fall of man. That event was the shameful and sensual sin of Ham, one of the sons of Noah, placed in contrast with the honorable and filial piety of Shem and Japheth, his two brethren. Discerning in their character, as shown on that occasion, the germs and first-fruits of the conduct and destinies of their posterity, the patriarch seizes the opportunity for casting the horoscope of the future, and foreshadowing the fortunes of his children and their descendants. You will mark that he speaks not by any authority of God, but by his own patriarchal and prophetic insight, forecasting the future. He cries to his children : first ; "cursed be Canaan"—Canaan is named only as a representative of the whole posterity of Ham—"a servant of servants shall he be to his brethren ;" next ; "blessed be the Lord God of Shem ; and Canaan shall be his servant ;" and lastly ; "God shall enlarge Japheth and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem ; and Canaan shall be his ser-

vant." There, my hearers, I suppose, is the place where "the irrepressible conflict" began between the curse of slavery and the blessing of freedom.

The first fulfilment of the prophecy took place among the posterity of Shem. "Blessed" indeed was "the Lord God of Shem," and the God of blessing—the patriarchal God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in whom "all the nations of the earth should be *blessed*"—the covenant God of Israel, the heirs of promise and blessing, "of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all *God blessed* for ever." The Israelites—the lineal children of Shem—inherited this blessing in the possession of the land of promise as a free and holy people of God; the Canaanites, the lineal children of Ham, inherited the ancestral curse in their subjection and slavery to Israel as an outcast and servile people. It was not accidental that they could not be exterminated from the land by the armies of Israel; it was not accidental that many of them became "servants of servants"—"hewers of wood and drawers of water" to Israel; it was all by permission of Divine Providence, in order that by their insurrections, their sensualities, their idolatries, they might furnish occasions for the moral trial and discipline of Israel—occasions for putting to the proof their fidelity to the truth and righteousness of God. So the text declares; "know for a certainty that the Lord your God will no more drive out any of these nations from before you." And why not? Because they must remain to be "snares and traps unto you, and scourges in your sides, and thorns in your eyes." And so they did remain, living among them, generation after generation—their slaves and their enemies—a perpetual temptation and trial—a fretting torment and nuisance—"snares and traps," "scourges" and "thorns," not to be got rid of—not to be endured. That was the form of "the irrepressible conflict" between Israelite and Canaan-

ite—between the freedom and blessing of the children of Shem and the slavery and curse of the children of Ham.

The corresponding fulfilment of the prophecy among the posterity of Japheth has fallen upon our own times and experience. In the year 1620, two ships landed upon the shores of North America, each bringing a cargo of immigrants. One ship was the May Flower, bringing from Europe to New England a colony of one hundred Puritan Englishmen—Anglo-Saxons of the great Germanic race—children of Japheth; the freest, purest, noblest body of men that ever went forth to found a nation and possess a great inheritance. They carried in their hearts the principles of freedom and equality in their simplest forms—freedom of conscience, and equality of rights before God—resolved to embody these principles in their Church and State. Therefore on the ship before they landed, they laid the corner-stone of their free institutions by forming “a civil body-politic,” or as we should say, a constitution, for the protection of their freedom and rights. They were soon followed by others of kindred spirit, who colonized the whole of New England; and their descendants have spread far and wide, carrying the principles and institutions of freedom and human rights in their purest and simplest form. Palfrey, in his just published history of New England, tells us, that there are now in the country over three millions of native New Englanders; and that nearly one-third of the white population of the country—seven or eight millions—are more or less directly of New England descent; while the leaven of New England influence has been even more prominent and powerful. God has “enlarged” these children of Japheth, “dwelling” as they do “in the tents of Shem”—dwelling under the protection, and inheriting the blessing of the God of Israel;

and has given them freedom, broad territories and a great inheritance.

The other ship which landed in the same year 1620, brought from Africa to Virginia a gang of twenty negroes—Congo slaves of the great African race—children of Ham; the blackest, poorest, most abject and degraded of mankind. Spain and Portugal had before imported negro slaves into the West Indies and South America; but these were the first brought into the English colonies. They were the forerunners of multitudes of others, whom the Slave-trade for two centuries continued to bring into the country. They also have multiplied and spread themselves far and wide, until they now number four millions; and their condition and destiny has become the great and troublous question of American politics. Canaan has become the servant of Japheth; and with the same result as when he became the servant of Shem; “a snare and a trap unto us, a scourge in our sides, and a thorn in our eyes”—a perpetual cause of agitation and trial—a trouble and an eyesore, not to be got rid of, hardly to be endured. This is the form of “the irrepressible conflict” between Japheth and Ham—between the enlargement and blessing of the free European, and the oppression and curse of the enslaved African. It seems to me suitable to this occasion—to this time when the conflict appears to be drawing near a crisis, or at least a trying ordeal—to consider *the Providential Design of slavery and the slavery agitation and conflict in relation to us and to the nation*. And this will teach us what sins to feel and confess to-day.

In one word, the design of God in this controversy is to *afflict and discipline the nation*. Let us see how.

I. I answer first, it seems to be God’s design *to trouble the nation by this conflict in order to keep us from moral stagnation*. It would have been much pleasanter for the

Israelites, 'if they could have utterly exterminated the Canaanites, and then settled down at ease in their goodly land, "flowing with milk and honey," with nothing to do but to eat the fat and drink the sweet—to trade, and make money, and grow rich and powerful. That, no doubt, was the desire and hope of their hearts. But, sad to say, this was not the chief end of man then, and never will be. This was not the way God governed the world then, and is not the way now. Men must have something to trouble them—to stir up their quiet nests—to break up their worldly ease—to blast their selfish hopes—to make them know that man's chief end is to glorify God and do his will—to seek first his kingdom and righteousness. One grand agency for the doing of this in Israel was their Canaanite enemies and slaves, serving for generations as the rod of God's judgments upon them; the snare by which their feet were entrapped into sin—the scourge in their sides by which their flesh was tormented—the thorn in their eyes by which their souls was fretted and troubled.

God is using African slavery in our land for the same discipline. It were much more pleasant for us if the African had never come hither—if slavery had never cursed the nation; it were much more pleasant if we could be left at our ease, to possess the land, to enjoy its resources, to trade and grow rich and great. But ah! that is not the best way; and therefore it is not God's way. The nation would have been in danger of ruin by worldly prosperity and moral stagnation. Our glorious country—our fruitful fields of wheat and cotton—our heaps of gold and silver—our farms and merchandize would have stolen away the nation's heart from the God of our fathers, from truth and duty, from liberty and righteousness.

So, then, God permitted the African to be brought here, with the yoke of slavery upon his neck, in the very year that the Puritan Englishman came here with a free heart in his breast. And when the hour struck in his Providence, then the word of God came forth from this free heart crying: AGITATE! AGITATE! AGITATE! OVERTURN! OVERTURN! OVERTURN! And the agitation and overturning began, in individual minds, in families, in Churches, in communities, in Societies, in political parties, in Congresses, in the whole nation of thirty-one millions. Men have tried to stifle and crush out this agitation—selfish and worldly men—quiet and peace-loving men—pious and conservative men; they have piled upon it mountains of resolutions and compromises; but it would not be stifled and crushed out; it has proved itself to be the true fire of God by rending its way through these mountains, and burning them to ashes and cinders. I pretend not to justify the Anti-Slavery movement in this country; the God of Providence will justify that! I pretend not to justify the excesses of violent and malignant spirits, whether on one side or the other; the God of righteousness will judge them! But I pity the blindness of the man, who can not see the outstretched arm of God made bare, both in the existence of slavery, and in the agitation for its overthrow.

This agitation is God's wonderful work for the troubling of our Israel. Nor is it the unmixed evil which some imagine it to be. Rather it is our life and hope as a free people. Agitation is the life and blessing of the whole universe. The tides, and currents, and tempests, that agitate the ocean serve to purify its waters. The winds, and clouds, and lightnings, yea even the whirlwinds, that agitate the atmosphere, serve to purify the air and refresh the earth. It is especially the life and blessing of nations. They

have, or used to have, no national agitations in China ; but who envies the stolid and lethargic indifference of her three or four hundred millions ? They have few national agitations in Russia ; but who envies the sluggish or stagnant despotism of that barbaric empire ? Whereas a free and favored nation like England has had one long history of agitation ; within two thousand years, she has been four times conquered, thrice torn by civil war, agitated by revolutions, reformatations, political and religious conflicts, without number or end ; and this is what has made her the free, great, powerful nation she is. Who would prefer the stillness and stagnation of the Dead Sea to the stirring life and movement of the Mediterranean, or even to the storms and surges of the wild Atlantic ? The agitation of the subject of slavery in our country is God's method of keeping the nation from stagnation—a painful process, it may be, hateful to the flesh, but necessary and wholesome to the spirit ! Who would dare to ask God to take this thorn out of our flesh, and leave us to our worldly ease and quiet and luxury untroubled ?

II. Another design of God in this providential agitation has been to compel intelligent and Christian men *to give personal attention to national affairs, and especially to apply moral and religious principles to politics*. No nation, as truly as no individual, can live long and prosper without moral life in its heart, and moral principle in its conduct. Corruption and disease will consume its vitality and rot out its strength, just as they are now consuming the dead and rotten government at Washington. The best intelligence and virtue of the nation must inspire and govern its affairs. Now we know that so it was in the early history of the country ; so it was in the times of the Revolution, and many years after. Names of great men in politics were then names of noble and Christian patriots

and statesmen whom we love to remember and honor. But how great a fall—how base a degeneracy from them to those small politicians of our times, who are too mean and contemptible to be named at all—who do not know what moral principle is—who do not believe there is such a thing above human governments as “God’s Higher Law”—who do not believe there is such a thing above human slavery as man’s natural and Christian rights—who scout the Declaration of Independence as a tissue of glaring falsehoods, or of glittering generalities.

One grand reason why this result has come about, is because men have divorced their morals and religion from their politics. Or rather, moral and religious men have left political affairs to low and intriguing politicians. They have occupied themselves with their families, their business, their studies, their personal interests, leaving the ignorant, the vicious, the demagogues, to elect the officers and administer the government, either sustaining them at the polls, or refusing to have anything to do with politics at all. So far had this gone, that when a Christian man, above all a minister, dared to say a word upon the political duties of men, he was denounced for “dabbling in the dirty pool of politics,” and “mixing up politics with religion.” To such a pass had things come! “Oh, what a fall was there my countrymen!” from the times when the first free constitution of America was formed by the Puritan Pilgrims, on the May Flower, “for the glory of God and advancement of the Christian faith;” from the times when, in Massachusetts and Connecticut, a moral and religious character was the condition of citizenship and office; from the times when Independence was declared, and the Constitution framed by the brightest intellects and noblest spirits of the nation, “appealing to the

Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of their intentions."

A change must needs come, if the nation was to live and do God's work in the world. The existence of slavery, with its evils, its aggressions, its extension, and the rise and progress of the Anti-Slavery movement, are the agencies God has used for working this change. These have been the scourges in God's hand to whip moral and religious men into the doing of their political duties. That was a grand day for the nation, when three thousand ministers of New England put off the silver slippers of official propriety, and walked bare-footed into the political "pool" of the U. S. Senate, bearing their petition against the repeal of the Missouri Compromise; and history has vindicated the wisdom and necessity of their remonstrances! That was a high day in our history when ten thousand pulpits and platforms resounded with denunciations of the bloody outrages in Kansas; for it heralded a great moral revolution! This is an eventful time in our experience to-day, when all business men are compelled by the scourge of events to have political opinions, and to act and vote; when even the most conservative and pro-slavery minister has his mouth opened, and his tongue loosed to speak according to his light, of *the moral and Christian duties of men in respect to politics*. God be thanked that all citizens have now, or pretend to have, a conscience in politics—an earnest mind to utter, and a ready heart to act, whether for slavery or against it! God be praised for this fresh breeze from the pure mountains where God dwelleth! Storms and tempests may come upon its wings, but who does not prefer them to the dead and parched air of the desert, or the foul and poisonous miasma of the swamp!

III. A third design of God in this Providential agitation, is *to test our fidelity to the principles of our fathers, and to work out the problem of human rights and freedom*. The Puritan founders of New England believed that every man as a man stands before God free and equal to his fellow-man. They believed that Christianity means essentially *redemption* or freedom; first of all *spiritual* freedom—deliverance of the soul from the curse and bondage of sin; next *religious* freedom—liberty to worship according to their own consciences; then *intellectual* freedom—liberty to think according to their own free minds, and speak their own free thoughts; then *civil* freedom—liberty to act and vote in the government of public affairs; and finally, *personal* freedom—liberty to own and control one's own person, property and labor. These principles of Christian freedom, they wrought out and embodied in their institutions; not always acting consistent with them, but always toiling painfully toward their full application. The Declaration of Independence: "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; and that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed"—this Declaration expressed the honest and Christian conviction of the nation's heart eighty-five years ago, both North and South.

But that conviction cost something. It cost the fathers banishment from England. It cost labor, struggles, suffering, self-denial, losses, blood. It cost revolution and war. But they chose to pay the dear price, not counting the cost, or rather counting it all, but paying it willingly for the truth and liberties they loved. They bequeathed the heritage thus bought to their posterity. Will *they* value

and cherish it? Will they prove faithful to their charge, by working out for mankind their natural and Christian liberties? That is the question to be solved in our history.

So, then, the African must come here—the lowest of mankind; he must come and wear the yoke of personal slavery—the worst form of human bondage. And in God's own time, when African slavery has grown strong and powerful, He will come to the nation—as He comes now—with the trying question, which is like fire to search and burn our hearts: Do you believe what the fathers believed? Do you believe that all men have natural and Christian rights to life and liberty—to self-ownership, self-control, and the produce of their own labor—rights essentially inalienable? Do you believe—according to the Divine maxim—that you are bound to give to others, even the blackest, poorest, meanest African slave, the same rights and liberties of humanity and Christianity, which you claim for yourselves? If you believe this, dare you stand up for your faith, speaking it, acting it, voting it? Dare you do it at the price of self-sacrifice, losses, revolutions, disunion, it may be, bloodshed? I suppose these to be the questions by which God is now trying the mind and heart of this nation, as never before since the times when the same principles “tried men's souls” in the days of the fathers. It seems plain that this nation is working out for the poor slave—the accursed child of Ham—and through him for all the races of mankind, the grand truth of Christianity, that every man is a man and a redeemed man, and as such has a Divine worth and sacredness, and ought to have the rights and liberties of a redeemed and Christian humanity.

I believe that fidelity to human freedom, in this form, is more trying to us than it was to the fathers, for they

wrought out the problem for *themselves*, while we must work it out for *others*, for an alien race—for a poor, out-cast, servile people, against whom we feel the strongest natural antipathy. But we must remember that to maintain the rights of others, according to the doctrine of universal rights, is the only way to preserve our own.

You know that when the Jews tried to hoard up for themselves their special privileges as exclusively their own, because they were the children of Abraham, although these privileges had been given to them expressly for the blessing of all the nations of the earth, that Christ came to break down the wall of partition, and give these blessings to all men; first of all to the publican, the Galilean, the Samaritan, ah mark you, the poor *Canaanite* woman of Syro-Phenicia, descendant of the son of Ham—descendant of the conquered and servile tribes of Canaan—willing to come as “a dog” to “eat of the crumbs that fell from the Master’s table,” of which the proud Pharisee refused to eat at all.

So God is putting us to the sharp test, whether the liberty He has given us is to be hoarded as our exclusive possession, or to be extended to all men, even the African slave. Therefore as an American citizen and Christian, I thank God for the providential scourges of slavery and slavery agitation, which are teaching men by stern chastisement, the great principles of human rights and Christian freedom. Therefore I rejoice in the fiery ordeal through which the nation is now passing, though it may consume many darling opinions and prejudices, and revolutionize many cherished institutions; for the hand of God is in it, pushing on the wheels of his kingdom for the redemption of all the races of mankind.

IV. One more design of God in this providential agitation, is to *humble our national pride, vain-glory, self-*

complacence. If there had been no Canaanites left in the land to trouble Israel, they might have become even more exalted in their pride and self-sufficiency than they did. So these enemies and slaves remained to be "thorns in their eyes," when tempted to vanity and self-importance. So our nation was peculiarly liable to such a danger; so wonderful has been our history—so unparalleled our prosperity—so rich, great, powerful we have become. Indeed we have the reputation in Europe of being the most vain-glorious people of the civilized world. So, then, God long ago prepared this thorn to be stuck into our eye.

A thorn in the eye—mark the meaning of that! The eye is the most tender and sensitive member of the whole body, and the sharp point of a thorn could prick no where else so painfully as there. And what is the tenderest place in our American pride? Ah, it is our *freedom*—this is what we glory in, and vaunt to the heavens! So, then, God has stuck the thorn just *there* in the eye—wounding us right where we feel the tenderest—paining us right where we feel the most vain-glorious—humbling us right where we feel the proudest. How many times has our American pride of freedom been wounded by the prickly remembrance of our millions of slaves! How many times has our national vanity shrunk its wide-spread peacock feathers, when other nations have pointed at the *black feet* under these brilliant plumes! How many times have our missionaries blushed and hid their faces, when their Heathen and Mussulman inquirers have heard that free and Christian America cherishes, vindicates and extends human slavery! Ah, indeed, how we feel to-day like hiding our heads with shame and confusion of face, that a large number of the American people—heirs of liberty—threaten to pull down our temple of freedom, because

forsooth! the nation has voted not to curse any more territory with African bondage! Be sure that the God of Providence has thrust this very thorn into our eyes, for the express purpose of piercing the tenderest nerve of our self-complacent, vain-glorious pride of freedom!

It is said that one of the Egyptian Kings used to have in his palace, near his throne, a human skeleton, to keep him humble in view of the prospect of his own mortality. African slavery is the skeleton which God has brought into our national temple, to make us humble, to bring down our pride, to remind us of our sins. He would make us conscious of our dependence on Him for our freedom and blessings; and of our obligation, instead of hoarding them for ourselves, to dispense them as a sacred trust for all the families of mankind—and above all, according to the principles and example of Christ—to give the first and the most to those who are poorest and neediest!

I could mention other evident designs of Providence in the existence and agitation of slavery; it would be especially interesting for us to consider these designs in respect to the condition and destinies of the negro race, both here and in Africa; but I forbear. It may be thought by some of you that I should have confined myself to-day to the present difficulties of the country. But it seemed to me better to refresh your minds with some of the great principles that underlie the events of the present. The mariner best determines his position on the ocean by observing the heavens—those eternal stars that never change place, but always shine the same. So we take observations of these Divine and eternal principles of God's providence, in order to see present events in the right light.

Well, then, here is our criterion of humiliation, fasting and prayer. We do not mourn to-day over the agitation

of slavery ; it is God's work, and not man's ; it is a national blessing and not a curse. We do not mourn over the application of religion to politics ; that also is God's work and not man's ; it is a thing to be welcomed and rejoiced over. We do not mourn over our love of freedom—freedom for ourselves—freedom for all men—freedom for our territories. That we inherit, for our fathers loved it ; it runs in our blood ; it beats in our hearts ; it is ingrained in the fibre of our flesh ; ah, it is stamped upon our consciences, and God has stamped it there in the lineaments of his own image and likeness ! We are not sorry that, after long struggles, we have elected a President on the plain issue of freedom or slavery, as the national creed ; we are glad of it, because we have tried to do our duty conscientiously, and if we had it to do over, we should do the same thing again. We are sorry that such an event should breed trouble, revolution, excitement ; but we know that God's truth in this world must bring "not peace ; but a sword."

We recognize in these troubles and difficulties God's snares and traps for our feet, scourges for our sides, thorns for our eyes. We feel humbled over our past unfaithfulness as a nation to the principles of Christian liberty and humanity, whose standard God has given us to bear aloft before the eyes of the nations. We feel humbled that while God is striking off the chains of slavery from the minds of men in Italy ; while the edict of emancipation, issued on the first day of this new year, by the Czar of Russia, goes forth for the breaking of the yoke of serfdom from the necks of his millions of slaves, that here in Republican America, the grand discovery has been made that slavery is a Divine institution, sanctioned by Christ himself—the foundation of all national prosperity—the jewel of our American institutions, to be cherished,

extended and perpetuated for ever ! We feel especially humbled and mortified by the weakness and imbecility, the corruptions and rottenness of our pro-slavery administration at Washington, at this critical period of our history : “ woe unto thee,” cried the prophet, “ when thy King is a child.”

Nor are we free of sin as individuals in this matter. We have not loved freedom as our fathers loved it, as the dearest treasure of mankind, without which all else is nothing worth ; we have put business before duty—profit before principle—peace and union before righteousness—commerce and cotton before freedom and humanity. We have been proud and vain-glorious when we ought to have been humble and shame-faced. Some of us have been bitter in spirit toward our brethren who are heirs to the misfortunes, the perplexities, the curses, the delusions of slavery, when we ought to remember that in heart we may be no better or holier than they—that it is God and not ourselves who has made us to differ from them.

I think also that we ought to be ashamed of our cowardly fears for the future. The same God of Providence who guided our fathers in forming our Constitution and Union, will preserve them just as long as they ought to be preserved, and nobody ought to wish them preserved any longer. Let us have faith in God, and dare to do right, though the heavens fall !





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